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Syria: Assad's Grip on Power

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An Intelligence Assessment

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*NESA 83-10199
August 1983*

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Syria: Assad's Grip on Power

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted]
Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis.
It was coordinated with the Directorate of
Operations. [redacted]

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, NESAs,

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**Syria:
Assad's Grip on Power**

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 11 August 1983
was used in this report.*

Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad's grip on power remains firm after 13 years in office. We believe his security and intelligence forces, including several elite units under the command of relatives or trusted confidants, constitute a formidable obstacle to any challenge. In our view, Assad has shown both the determination and the capability to crush any threat to his rule. Just as he uses brutal force to quell domestic dissent, he takes uncompromising positions on foreign policy issues that he perceives could threaten Alawite rule in Syria.

Assad's hardline position on Lebanon reflects, at least in part, a determination to maintain sufficient leverage with Beirut to prevent that neighboring state from becoming closely linked to Israel or otherwise become a base for his opponents. At least one of Assad's advisers has argued that continuing Syrian intransigence risks a costly and destructive war with Israel, but we believe Assad calculates he can accept the risks of conflict and control any serious dissension in the regime.

There are recurring rivalries among Assad's senior advisers, but we believe his inner circle remains loyal, and there is no obvious contender for power. In our view, differences of view between the President and his brother, Rifaat al-Assad, are largely calculated for domestic political purposes and to achieve room to maneuver between the United States and the Soviet Union. We know of no contender for power in Syria who would abandon ties to the Soviets or enter the peace process without prior assurances that Syrian interests, including the return of the Golan Heights, would be served.

In our view, Assad's repressive style of rule, the loss of dynamism by the Ba'th Party, widespread corruption, economic woes, and setbacks in foreign policy head a growing list of regime liabilities that have sent its popularity to an alltime low. Nevertheless, we believe Assad's centralized control and his comparatively successful efforts to create a large group of party and government workers dependent on the regime is an effective substitute for a popular constituency.

The regime's continuing arrests of key opposition leaders and its harsh suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood and other fundamentalist organizations, in our view, have reduced most potential opponents to sullen acquiescence. The diverse coalition of Assad's opponents based in Europe is unlikely to attract widespread popular support inside Syria. Assad has largely co-opted the Syrian political left.

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We believe Assad would be most vulnerable to a coup from within his own Alawite community, disrupting his hold on the key instruments of power. Assad, however, relies on Alawite fears of retribution from the majority Sunni Muslims. In our judgment, the Alawite elite continues to regard Assad as its best hope for retaining preeminence in Syria, and the wider Alawite community still supports him for the measurable benefits of having one of its own in power.

Foreign support for Syrian dissidents has little impact on Assad's prospects, in our view. Iraq and Jordan have provided safehaven and limited support for Syrian opposition groups, but, in our judgment, Iraq's preoccupation with the war with Iran and Jordanian fears of Syrian retaliation make it less likely that either state would now attempt to provoke a challenge to the regime. Moscow currently is deeply committed to Assad's survival in power. We believe, however, that Moscow—through its training program for Syrian officers—has gained some influence among potential replacements for Assad, should he be ousted.

Assad frequently adopts policies that run counter to US interests, but his long tenure in office has proved him to be a calculating pragmatist. We believe many of his foreign policy decisions are determined by domestic and international concerns that would confront any successor government. The increasingly repressive character of his regime and Assad's numerous liabilities reinforce his current inclination to look at most issues in terms of regime survival and reduce his willingness to take a more flexible approach to present US policy initiatives.

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Syria: Assad's Grip on Power

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President Assad's minority Alawite regime maintains a firm grip on power in Syria, but the government's popularity continues at a low ebb. Over the past five years the sectarian character of the regime has emerged as a key issue, and Assad's liabilities have mounted. Academic observers note that the country's majority Sunnis deeply resent being ruled by what many of them regard as ill-bred Alawite peasants who rely on indiscriminate repression to remain in power.

Assad's Liabilities

The sectarian split between Assad's ruling Alawite minority and the Sunni Muslim majority has emerged as a key issue dividing Syrian society. Assad's appointment of Alawites to most of the sensitive positions in his regime has fostered an only slightly exaggerated perception in Syria that the nation is exclusively ruled by Alawites,

although some prominent regime figures are Sunnis—including Defense Minister Mustafa Talas, Chief of Staff Hikmat Shihabi, and Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam—the key military and security advisers to the President are Alawites.

Longstanding social cleavages between urban and rural sectors of the Syrian population aggravate Sunni opposition to Alawite rule. Academic observers note that Sunni urban merchants vehemently object to the policies of Assad's rural-based regime. Long accustomed to political and economic domination, the Sunni urbanites have witnessed the funneling of development funds to the provinces and a high rate of migration from rural areas into the cities, where Alawites crowd the job market and the universities and dominate the top positions in government.

The Alawites—Syria's Ruling Minority

Syria's ruling Alawites are sharply differentiated from the Sunni majority by their religious doctrines, low social status, and the geographic concentration of their home areas.

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Most Sunni Muslims regard Alawites as heretics because the Alawites view Ali, the nephew and son-in-law of Muhammad, as the incarnation of God. Assad has made a concerted effort to minimize Sunni-Alawite differences, but, in our view, critics of the regime continue to focus on the sectarian issue.

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Historically, limited educational opportunity and exclusion from avenues of social mobility fueled a vicious cycle of Sunni prejudice and discrimination against the Alawite minority. French rule in Syria provided Alawites with access to military careers, however, and the rise of the secular-based Ba'th Party afforded a means for political advancement.

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The Alawites, who constitute 10 to 13 percent of Syria's 9.6 million people, have lived primarily in the mountains of northwest Syria, a traditional refuge from Sunni persecution.

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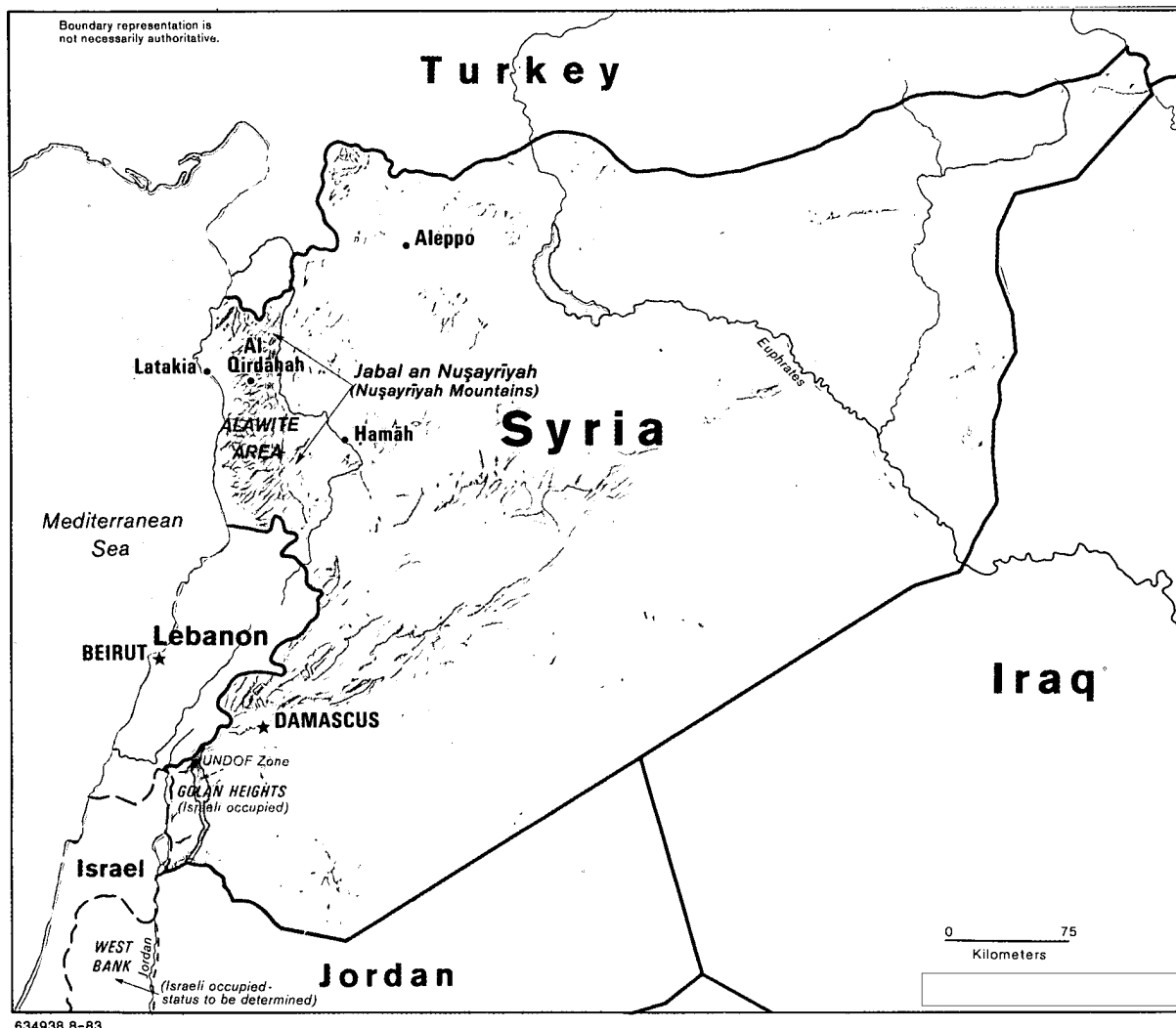
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With the rise to power in 1966 of Alawite strongman Salah Jadid, the Alawites gained a prominence in Syria far beyond their small number. Appointments of Alawites to numerous government and Ba'th Party positions, together with development policies targeted at the regime's rural base of support, have enabled the Alawite community to turn the tables on the Sunni Muslim majority who once dominated Syrian political and economic life.

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Over Assad's 13 years in office, the regime has lost the dynamism of its first years, sapping its popularity. Academic observers note that Assad's bureaucracy has too many people telling other people how, when, and where to do their jobs. Assad's closest advisers remain in office year after year. We believe those who advance owe their rise to loyalty to Assad rather than to initiative or promise. According to US Embassy reports, Assad's system of control without public accountability has allowed corruption to become widespread.

In our view, the oppressive hand of Assad's security services and the absence of significant political freedoms further weaken the regime's legitimacy. European diplomats in Damascus report that the visibility of armed security agents of the regime, together with widespread awareness of the regime's brutal tactics in dealing with the opposition, reinforce the popular perception that the basis of the regime's power is its

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President Hafiz al-Assad

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monopoly on force. The rubberstamp role of the Syrian legislature, the People's Assembly, government domination of the press, and bureaucratic regulations, such as the requirement of exit visas for anyone wishing to leave the country, further limit the average Syrian's limited political rights.

Syria's continuing economic woes compound the regime's political problems, according to academic observers. Syria's commercial sector is stagnant due to the government's rigid control of trade and chronic foreign exchange shortages.

few private individuals are willing to invest in the country for fear the government will take over a successful enterprise once it is established. The industrial sector lacks effective middle management and shop floor supervision, and most factories use outmoded East European technology. Syrian Government statistics indicate that the agricultural sector has expanded, but not rapidly enough to keep pace with rapid population growth, and Syria's imports of grain have escalated since 1975. Inflation has put basic amenities, such as housing, out of reach for many wage earners.

We believe foreign policy mishaps since the mid-1970s have also contributed to mounting popular dissatisfaction and the regime's isolation in the region.

Academic observers note that Assad has failed to achieve the goals set out by Damascus to justify its intervention in Lebanon in 1976—the prevention of the partition of Lebanon, the establishment of a government favorable to Syria, and the creation of a buffer against the Israeli threat to Syria from the west. Syrian relations with Iraq and Jordan remain hostile, while Damascus has put distance between itself and the Arab majority by strengthening ties to Khomeini's Iran. Despite pretensions to Arab leadership, Syria, in our view, can count among its Arab allies only Libya and South Yemen.

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Maintaining Control

The Syrian system of government is highly centralized. Under the 1973 constitution, Assad has authority over the government machinery, the Cabinet, the legislature, and the armed forces. He also has a strong voice in the judicial process.

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Assad's control over Syrian decisionmaking is strengthened by the informal mechanisms, hidden from public view, through which he exercises power,

Assad governs primarily through the unofficial group of trusted advisers who are Alawites or confidants who have proved themselves through long association with the President.

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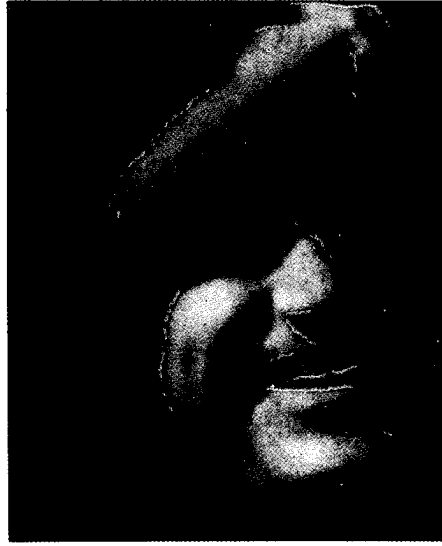
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Rifaat Assad commands the heavily armed, predominantly Alawite force known as the Defense Companies, which has primary responsibility for ensuring regime survival. In conjunction with a special antitank unit known as the Struggle Companies commanded

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Gen. Muhammad al-Khuli, head of Air Force Intelligence and security adviser to President Assad [redacted]



Rifaat al-Assad [redacted]

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by Adnan Assad, the President's nephew, the Rifaat force assures the defense of the capital against the frequent military coups that plagued Syrian politics in the years prior to Assad's takeover in 1970. According to US Embassy officials in Damascus, these elite units are trained to protect key points in the city, such as radio and communications stations, military and intelligence headquarters, Ba'th Party institutions, and key political and military figures in the event of political rebellion, mob violence, or military coup efforts. [redacted]

Mobilizing Popular Support

Assad's success in making a large sector of the population dependent on the regime has been a substitute for a strong popular constituency, according to academic observers. Through maximizing government employment, Assad has created a constituency of the salaried middle class, workers, and peasants dependent on the regime for work and benefits. Moreover, according to US Embassy officers in Damascus, the presence of a vigorous "second economy" has ameliorated the impact of the poor state of Syria's Government-controlled economy, diminishing popular disaffection with the regime. Individual middle class Syrians, as well as entire villages, are thriving on undeclared remittances from migrants to the Gulf or investments in commercial, residential, or agricultural property abroad. [redacted]

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Assad has pursued a more pragmatic course than his Alawite predecessor, Salah Jadid, and his policies have resulted in tangible gains for minorities, women, peasants, and the urban poor, according to academic observers. Living standards have been raised. Road, telephone, water, sewage, and electric networks have

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been developed and improved throughout the country. A recent academic study noted that education has become widely available and illiteracy cut to less than 25 percent for adult men and to 55 percent for women. [REDACTED]

Assad's political vehicle, the Ba'th Party, has only limited influence on government decisionmaking, but we believe it buttresses the regime by controlling popular participation in the discussion of government policy. Academic observers note that the party apparatus is composed of a series of assemblies to allow expression of popular views to decisionmakers and executive and specialized bureaus that explain and implement government policies. These are linked to a series of auxiliary organizations for peasants, workers, youth, women, and professionals. A recent scholarly study of the Ba'th Party estimated that the party has about 100,000 members, but that, through its auxiliaries, it has organized about one-third of the population. In the countryside, where the party's base is widest, the typical Ba'th organization is made up of educated village youth and peasants with small- or medium-sized landholdings, according to the study. [REDACTED]

We believe that in response to concern that the Ba'th Party's utility in mobilizing popular support is declining, Assad has sanctioned efforts to explore possible alternatives to the party. European diplomats in Damascus report that the average Syrian's attitude toward the Ba'th is disdainful acquiescence and that the party has lost its dynamism to the point of resembling a large government ministry. [REDACTED]

Opposition in Disarray

Longstanding opposition among the majority Sunni Muslims to Alawite dominance and the avowed secular character of the regime has prompted periodic outbreaks of violence since the mid-1970s. Academic

observers note that Assad enjoyed a honeymoon with the conservative Sunni community throughout the first half of the decade. His moderate economic and foreign policies were generally acceptable to the class of urban traders who lead the Muslim community. After 1975, however, the regime's mounting liabilities, including its decision to intervene in Lebanon, together with the emergence of more militant groups within the Islamic opposition, sparked a resort to violence. [REDACTED]

Beginning in 1976 Assad's opponents scored some initial successes against the regime. According to the dissident leaders' public claims, a militant faction of the Muslim Brotherhood and other fundamentalist organizations began a wave of bombings and assassinations of prominent Alawites that continued through 1978. In June 1979 several dozen Alawite and Christian officer cadets were murdered in Aleppo. In June 1980 Assad himself was the target of a grenade attack that killed one of his guards. By early 1981 government spokesmen admitted to over 300 assassinations of persons connected with the regime, and in August 1981 an explosion at the Prime Minister's office killed a further score of people. [REDACTED]

Mass civil disorder has erupted twice since the late 1970s in major cities, although the disturbances did not spread to Damascus, the key to power in Syria. Throughout late 1979 and early 1980 various opposition groups coalesced in Aleppo to stage a series of strikes and demonstrations that paralyzed the city, according to diplomatic reports. Aleppo merchants protesting price controls declared a general strike in March 1980 that spread to other major provincial towns. Various professional associations issued manifestos demanding an end to the regime's use of special security courts, the release of political prisoners, and basic civil liberties. The regime responded by using troops to seal off Aleppo and gradually forcing the inhabitants into sullen submission. [REDACTED]

We believe the watershed of Syrian opposition activity occurred in February 1982, when an even bloodier uprising began in Hamah, a city of 200,000 and a stronghold of religious orthodoxy and opposition to

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*Destruction in the provincial
city of Hamah during the re-
gime's harsh suppression of the
popular uprising in February
1982* [redacted]

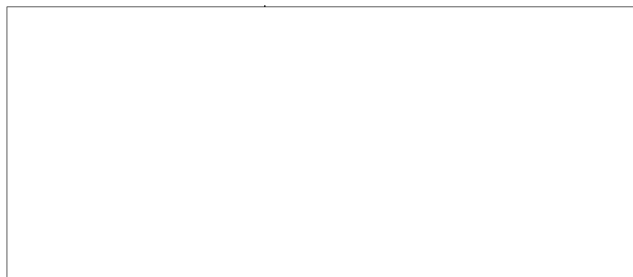


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the regime. According to US Embassy reports, organized opposition attacks on government installations, led by a militant wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, led to numerous deaths of security and Ba'th Party officials. The regime used brutal tactics to suppress the revolt, bringing up artillery to flatten opposition-held quarters of the city, before launching a several weeklong mopping up operation of shootings and arrests. Estimates vary, but we believe as many as 10,000 civilians were killed [redacted]





Adnan Saad al-Din, Muslim Brotherhood leader

Europe denouncing the regime and outlining a liberal platform for a new regime. In our judgment, the Alliance is unlikely to attract widespread support inside Syria. [redacted]

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Assad faces little threat from the Syrian left, according to US diplomats in Damascus. Much of the traditional left has been incorporated into the Ba'th Party and its coalition—the National Progressive Front—with the Communist Party, Ba'th socialist offshoots, and remnants of Nasirist groups. The coalition remains firmly under the control of Assad and his Ba'th Party appointees. [redacted]

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The Communist Party of Syria, under Khalid Bakdash, supports Assad in exchange for limited freedom of action and a share in the government's rewards for loyalty. [redacted]

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[redacted] we believe pressure from Assad's security services and the absence of coordination in their activities have left them powerless to challenge the regime. [redacted]

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Foreign Involvement

In our view, foreign involvement is unlikely to affect significantly the opposition's capability to challenge the regime over the next several years. Iraq and Jordan have long provided a haven and limited support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition groups, but we believe Iraq's preoccupation with the war with Iran and Jordanian fears of Syrian retaliation diminish the current extent of their involvement in Syrian internal affairs. [redacted]

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[redacted] in our judgment, Tel Aviv would be unlikely to seek an overthrow of the Assad regime. Assad has prevented terrorist operations against Israel across the Golan Heights, and, despite Syria's inflexible position on withdrawal from Lebanon, Damascus has not pursued risky, confrontational tactics in the Bekaa Valley. In

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Several groups opposing the Assad regime have attempted a merger to overcome their losses at Hamah, according to press and diplomatic reports, but we believe the diversity of the organizations and individuals involved sharply diminishes any threat they pose to the regime. Exile leaders of the "National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria"—including Adnan Saad al-Din of the Muslim Brotherhood, Muhammad Bayanuni of the Islamic Front, and formerly prominent Syrian political leaders Amin al-Hafez and Akram Hawrani—have held press conferences in

addition, Syria's currently strained relations with Iraq and Jordan diminish the potential threat to Israel of the emergence of an eastern front. [REDACTED]

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Moscow's close relations with Assad, in our view, virtually preclude Soviet involvement in support of dissidents actively opposing the regime. In the event of a coup that removes Assad from the scene, Soviet training of Syrian military officers probably has provided Moscow with some influence among potential replacements for Assad. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] In our judgment, Soviet links to the Communist factions in Syria are currently of little value but could be called into play should Assad or a successor regime attempt to strengthen Syrian ties to the West at the expense of the USSR. [REDACTED]

The regime's intelligence and security apparatus poses a deterrent to would-be coup plotters, but we believe it cannot entirely eliminate the threat. Control of key security points in Damascus by Assad's praetorian guard means that a coup by a single brigade from outside the city—a common occurrence in the 1950s—is no longer possible. [REDACTED]

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Threats to the Regime

[REDACTED]

Assad's leadership of the Alawite community is potentially open to challenge, in our view. Assad was born into one of the smaller and less prestigious Alawite tribal confederations—the Kalbiyah—and must invest considerable resources in courting support among powerful Alawite families. [REDACTED]

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We believe factions among the Alawites in the military pose the principal potential threat to the regime. At least two identifiable military factions have opposed Assad in the past. Supporters of his predecessor Salah Jadid, currently in prison, and supporters of a now deceased former Defense Minister, Muhammad Umran, have been forced into quiescence by Assad's repressive measures, but we believe there are continuing rivalries in the military based on allegiances formed during the power struggle among Assad, Umran, and Jadid during the 1960s. [REDACTED]

Given Assad's ultimate authority over the decision-making process, we believe factions in his inner circle opposed to one of his policy decisions may decide their only recourse is to remove Assad himself. [REDACTED]

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Prospects

We cannot discount the possibility that Assad may be removed by assassination or a palace coup, but in our view, he has demonstrated both the ability and the willingness to crush any open challenge to Alawite rule in Syria. According to diplomatic observers, brutal repression has neutralized the organized opposition and forced potential opponents into a morose acquiescence to his rule. In our judgment, sporadic bombings or assassination attempts on Alawite officials are likely to recur, but, over at least the next few years, there is little likelihood of a successful, organized popular movement to remove Assad from power. [REDACTED]

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Despite the recurring rivalries among Assad's Alawite advisers, we believe his inner circle remains loyal. We also believe the Alawite elite currently regards Assad as the best hope for maintaining Alawite preeminence. Assad probably relies on Alawite fears of retribution if the majority Sunni community returns to power in Syria, and, in our view, key Alawite leaders would have to believe Assad was seriously endangering their future before they would move against him. [REDACTED]

US Embassy officers report that Assad continues to enjoy popular support among the broader Alawite community in northwest Syria. Local satisfaction with having an Alawite in power and the measurable benefits to the area from public expenditures give Assad a strong base of support there. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] both military and civilian members of the Alawite community believe the Assad regime must continue to demonstrate to Sunnis that the Alawites will retain power at any cost. [REDACTED]

addition to the Soviet combat forces manning the SA-5s, Soviet advisers serve throughout the armed forces—at the Ministry of Defense, major headquarters and staffs, training facilities, and with many operational units. Soviet weapons, including tanks, are provided to the Rifaat force, the mainstay of Assad's defense against a coup. [REDACTED]

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In our view, Syria's ties to the Soviet Union nevertheless increase Assad's domestic liabilities. The increased Soviet military presence risks inciting Assad's conservative Islamic opponents at home and could prompt a surge in antiregime terrorist activity, in part directed at Soviet personnel and installations. Increased Soviet involvement in Syrian military operations decisionmaking also would be likely to lead to frictions in the military and disputes with Moscow, such as occurred between the Soviets and Egypt in the early 1970s. [REDACTED]

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The Soviet Angle

We believe the Soviets are strongly committed to Assad's survival in power. Moscow probably fears that Assad's demise could, in the worst case, lead to the kind of protracted instability that characterized Syrian politics before Assad's rise to power and eventually to a strongly anti-Soviet regime based on the Sunni Muslim opposition. This case would reduce Damascus's ability to oppose US policies in the Middle East and leave the USSR isolated with the more radical Arab states. The Soviets probably are also concerned that a successor to Assad might undertake more risky policies in Lebanon and on the Golan Heights. [REDACTED]

Soviet assistance to Syria provides Assad with limited insurance against another military debacle that could threaten his hold on power, as well as direct support to his security forces. Soviet military deliveries over the past year have replaced Syria's battlefield losses in the conflict with Israel over Lebanon in 1982, and, in our view, the SA-5s and related systems have substantially upgraded Syrian air defense capabilities. In

Implications for the United States

In our judgment, domestic security concerns that result from the extensive liabilities of the regime are a key factor in Assad's foreign policy decisions affecting US interests. We believe his determination to prevent Israeli gains in Lebanon reflects in part a concern that a government in Beirut less responsive to Syrian interests would tolerate political activities by the regime's opponents and make Lebanon a base for operations threatening Assad's hold on power. Similarly, in our view, Assad's determination to establish Syria as the key to any progress in the peace process bolsters Assad's claim to legitimacy as an Arab leader, holds open the possibility of an eventual foreign policy victory by regaining Syrian lands—the Golan Heights—occupied by Israel, and provides some assurance that Arab subsidies to ameliorate Syria's foreign exchange shortage will be forthcoming. [REDACTED]

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Assad has frequently taken a course that runs counter to US interests, but his 13-year rule has shown him to be a calculating pragmatist. Summing up Assad's tenure in 1979, US diplomats in Damascus noted that many of his policies had worked to US advantage and in favor of stability in the area. Assad engaged the leftist Palestinians, and then rightist Christians, in Lebanon to suppress the civil war, he recognized Resolution 338, which incorporated UN Resolution 242 and served as the basis for the Golan disengagement agreement, and he opened Syria to the West and the United States. Despite his hardline position on withdrawal from Lebanon, Assad continues to demonstrate a willingness to maintain a dialogue with Washington. [redacted]

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We know of no contenders for power in Syria prepared to abandon Syria's military ties with the Soviets or willing to participate in the peace process without greater assurances that Syrian interests would be served. In our judgment, Rifaat Assad's occasional differences of view with President Assad and his allegedly pro-Western outlook are largely calculated. Rifaat's reported differences with the President appear designed to broaden the regime's appeal to both the right and left wings of the political spectrum and to give the Assads some room for maneuver between the United States and the Soviet Union. The reality is that, in our view, Assad's rigid control over the decisionmaking process provides an effective check against any effort by either superpower to gain leverage by exploiting policy differences within the President's inner circle. [redacted]

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[redacted], prominent members of the regime— [redacted]

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[redacted] have privately expressed opposition to some of Assad's policies, including the Syrian position on Lebanon. We believe Assad tolerates such divergences of view but moves against dissidents if they appear to threaten his primacy in decisionmaking. In our view, unhappiness within the leadership over Syria's involvement in Lebanon is not yet serious enough to threaten Assad's hold on power or to prompt alteration of that policy. [redacted]

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